TO LIVE A LIFETIME

Scripture: John 14:23-27
Isaiah 65:17-25
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Pablo Casals lived his 'entire lifetime'. So did Mother Theresa, whose death was eclipsed by Diana's. I doubt very much that Mother Theresa ever new the word for 'retirement'.

"To live a lifetime." I discovered that phrase in a passage that I know well. It's in one of the most important parts of the Bible. It's at the end of the book of Isaiah, a section, a letter actually, written to the exiled Hebrews, languishing in Babylon. It is God's promise not to abandon those

exiles, but to work through the sometimes murky processes of human history, to put things right, to redeem them, to bring them home where they belong, to restore them again to their rightful place.

The prophet describes what God has in mind for human life and it is a beautiful picture: a time when there will be no weeping; a time when there will be no infants dying; a time when people will build houses and then be allowed to live in them; a time when people will plant crops and vineyards and enjoy the produce; that is to say, a time of no economic exploitation, no military invasions, no one will labor in vain – and in the middle of it all – "No more shall there be an old person who does not live out a lifetime." [Isaiah 65:20]

What a wonderful concept. "No one will die without living a lifetime."

The Bible consistently honors and values old age. The old ones are called the Elders, a term of respect and honor. They are valued for wisdom and they become the judges in Israel because of their experience and their discernment.

The Bible seems to go out of its way to suggest that old age is a good idea, a good thing – not only for the elderly, but for the whole community. Without knowing exactly how the writers are counting, it is still clear that life doesn't really get interesting in the Bible until you're well along in years. Abraham, after all, is in his mid-70s when he and Sarah have their first baby, pick up their belongings, move to a new land. Just about the time you and I are looking around for a retirement facility with a good healthcare unit, Abraham and Sarah are looking for a place to start up a whole new nation.

The fact is, the Bible holds up a unique notion of the continuum of human life, moving toward its fulfillment, its summation, its completion – its "lifetimeness." That contrasts, as you know, rather sharply with the way our culture views the same subject of aging. Our culture's way of viewing aging is more accurately defined as loss, diminution, narrowing, deteriorating, falling apart at the seams, lessening in value. Not a victory but a defeat. Not growing, but growing smaller. Sometimes we even say that in its clearest and most oppressive form when we observe that we begin to die the day we're born. The Judeo-Christian tradition doesn't think like that. And the problem is that the degree to which we buy into the way our culture thinks, we diminish, not only the lives of the elderly, but, the Bible would suggest, all of our lives – the life of the culture itself.

One of the persons who thought most creatively about aging in our culture was a salty Presbyterian, one of the saints of our church, by the name of Maggie Kuhn. Maggie Kuhn died at the age of 89. She was a career employee, a bureaucrat of the national Presbyterian Church, and a good one. And when our denomination enforced the "mandatory-retirement-at-65" policy on her she was at first, astonished, and then hurt, and then she became very angry. So instead of moving to Florida or checking into the local retirement center, she formed an organization called the Gray Panthers and took on everything in the culture which she found limiting her life and the lives of the elderly.

"We are not 'Senior Citizens,'" she wrote. "We are not, certainly, 'Golden Agers.'" "We are the elders, the experienced ones: we are maturing, growing adults, responsible for the survival of the society." She concluded that nobody else much cared about whether we were going to live into another century, so the old people better care about it. [Maggie Kuhn on Aging, p. 41]

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Maggie Kuhn's point was that each of us has a gift, a lifetime to live – we don't know how long it's going to be but it is a lifetime – and it is our choice to live it at a pace and intentionality and a degree of intensity that is ours, not the culture's, to determine.

Actress and writer, Florida Scott Maxwell said:

> "We who are old know that age is more than a disability. It is an intense and varied experience, almost beyond our capacity at times, but something to be carried high. If it is a long defeat, it is also a great victory." [Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses*, p. 321]

This Christian faith of ours, with its Judaic roots, honors the elders, the parents of the culture among us, the wise and experienced ones. Part of what Jesus did after all, was to affirm the sacred value of every human being, particularly those his culture had rejected as worthless. The babies, for instance, who weren't worth much, Jesus asked to come to him and laid his hands on them; poor people, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, the ones with a disease everyone knew was a sign of some immorality, leprosy; all were part of the circle of the kingdom he formed around him. And so, of all the places in this world, his church, the church of Jesus Christ, is where the elderly are, and must be, honored and celebrated and accepted simply for who they are: valuable human beings, valuable and important parts of our community.

It is, of course, personally relevant for each of us. Some of us have aging parents who increasingly are dependent on us. Some of us must cope with aging parents who are ill, in another place, and whose personal needs are now more than we can begin to meet and so we find ourselves relying on others, sometimes people we don't know, but to whom we now must entrust the care of our dearest ones. Most of us are close to someone dealing with the changes of retirement, highly productive, hard-working professionals, who suddenly have nothing to do and

are unhappily bored, and, if married, driving another one crazy because of the enforced togetherness.

And, the obvious, our own aging, of course.

> "Old age is what you're stuck with if
> you want a long life," Judith Viorst quips.

We're getting older – as individuals, but also as a culture.

I love what Bruce Bliven, former editor of the *New Republic* magazine said about being seventy-something …

> "I don't feel like an old man. I feel like a young man with something
> wrong with him."

Or George Burns, an expert on the topic;

> "You know you're getting old when you stop to tie your shoes and
> wonder what else you can do while you're down there."

The population is aging. In fact, some demographers are suggesting that if you are already 65 and in reasonably good health, your life expectancy is around 90. It used to be that the major question for a 65 year-old was – "are you ready to let go and meet your maker?" Now the most relevant question is, "what are your plans for the next 25 years?"

Erik Erikson, who has taught us so very much about the stages of human development, said that the task or major characteristic of the "eighth stage," or old age, is integration; integrity. To see one's life as a whole piece, a "lifetime" to use Isaiah's wonderful image. Looking at life with absolute honesty and knowing finally what is important and what is not so important and probably never was.

Aging is not necessarily a time of diminishment of passion and profound caring, by the way. It is simply not accurate that young people feel powerfully and care deeply about things, while old people bank their fires and don't get excited about anything. As a matter of fact, I can testify that the members of my own congregation that I know to be passionately committed to causes – not always easy causes, by the way – abortion rights, handgun control, economic justice – who I can count on for strong response to sermons, pro, sometimes con, for that matter, are not necessarily the young adults.

One of the very best testimonies to the promise and possibility of aging that I have ever read at least, is a delightful book by Sadie and Bessie Delaney, *Having our Say*. One of the sisters has died since their book was published. They lived together all their lives. Their father was born into slavery and became the first African-American Episcopal Bishop. At the time they wrote the book, they were 103 and 101.

They were witty, full of joyful playfulness. Bessie, responding to the interviewer, said,

> "I'll tell you something, honey, I would have made a great president. That's right! Me! I'm honest and I'm tough – and the first thing I would do if I was president is to say that people over one hundred years of age no longer have to pay taxes! Lord knows, I've paid my share." [p. 199]

The sisters did Yoga every morning with a television program, and after Yoga, they each take a clove of garlic, chop it up and swallow it whole. No odor. "We also take a teaspoon of cod liver oil. Bessie thinks it's disgusting." I thought if you could do that every morning at 6:30, eat garlic and wash it down with cod liver oil, the rest of the day would be pretty easy.

They said their prayers every night. Because they were so old, they had a lot of relatives and they prayed for each one every night by name. So it took a long time.

Sadie used to wake first – at 6:30.

> "The first thing I do when I open my eyes is smile and then I say, 'Thank you Lord for another day …' and then I go to Bessie's room and wake her. Sometimes I have to knock on her headboard and she opens her eyes and says 'Oh, Lord, another day?'"

Near the end of the book the interviewer asks the inevitable question; do they think about death? Are they afraid to die? Sadie answers;

> "You know, when you are this old, you don't worry about dying, and neither does Bessie. We are at peace. You do kind of wonder, when it's going to happen. That's why you learn to love each day, child." [p. 205]

I have been blessed by how comfortable my children and grandchildren are with their grandfather and great grandfather, sitting on his lap while he reads a book to them. They know that he knows things we don't know. He knows what's really important and what's not so important. He knows that at that moment there is nothing as important as reading that book to that child.

There is a discernment with age: a movement from mere knowledge to something called wisdom. A sense of what is important and what is not so important. Part of it is a deepening trust, a personal sense that while aging may sometimes feel like a process of deterioration to us, it is at the same time a magnificent process of growing within the providence of a kind and loving God, a becoming who we are intended to be spiritually, a moving across the years to a summation, a completion, a lifetime.

That what the Presbyterian Home is about. Thanks be to God for its ministry: its service to the elderly and its testimony to the world about the meaning and value of human life. And thank you, each one of you, for all you do to support and enable this good work.

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Presbyterian Home's Seventh Annual Benevolent Care Dinner
September 7, 1997
Calvin House, Altoona, Pennsylvania

It is good to be home again. When you grow up in the middle of these gorgeous mountains, you're never quite at home anywhere in the Midwest. And so, Sue and I are always happy to have the opportunity to be in Altoona, to see dear friends again. I am particularly pleased to be here with the Presbyterian Homes. I have always had a warm spot in my heart for the Presbyterian Home in Hollidaysburg. When I was a little boy, my parents used to visit regularly in the Presbyterian Home in Hollidaysburg to call on Mrs. Hazhard. It was an arrangement made through Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church, I believe, and my parents used to visit her regularly and take me along.

Perhaps it was that early experience that resulted in my participation on the Board of Directors of Westminster Terrace in Columbus, Ohio and the Board of Directors of the Ohio Presbyterian Homes and now the Board of Directors of the Presbyterian Home in Evanston.

What all of those institutions, and this one particularly, do is very important.

I continue to be grateful for the compassion and sensitivity extended to me personally when my mother was critically ill and the Presbyterian Home of Hollidaysburg was willing to offer support and assistance as needed.

What we have to offer the world as Christians is Jesus Christ. Our good news is best shared in acts of compassion and justice. So thank you for that witness which you provide here as you support the good work of the Presbyterian Homes.

What the Presbyterian Home does, in its service to elderly persons, is eloquent testimony to the value and meaning of human life, the precious value of each human life – in its entirety.

Think with me for a few moments this evening about how important that affirmation is and how very different it is from the values celebrated in our culture around the important topic of aging.

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